





rain most of the time leading to flooding of the village the town made a river which transport their water to ocean.

Are filled with crystal Gem to power up ships, factories and kingdoms with light most people work in mines.



# Crypsis

The mangtis is capable to comfortable into a village. Due to its mass size it often found it the woods or near by villages.

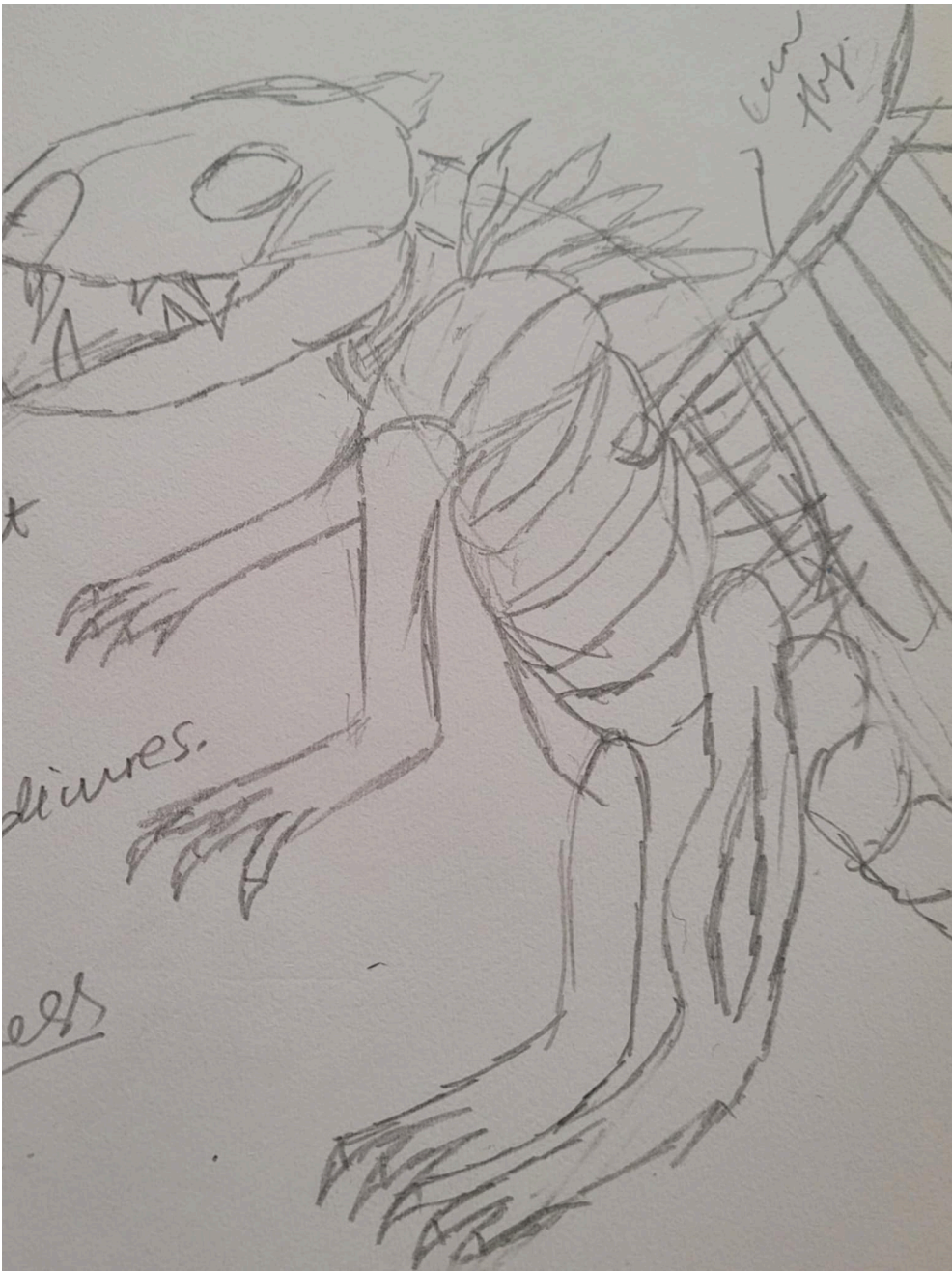
People who are lost in the wood often go into the houses . When the beast senses someone in his house it can use the tree and vines to bring the prey to him. The weakness to the Crypsis is fire since the crypsis is plant animal. If you survive the Crypsis you would wish you where dead.



Death

Death, the monster that accompanied the ship, decomposed upon landing, leaving behind bones. Death sanitises his hunger by using the life of humans, animals, and plants. The humans who become shipwrecked or executed to their death.

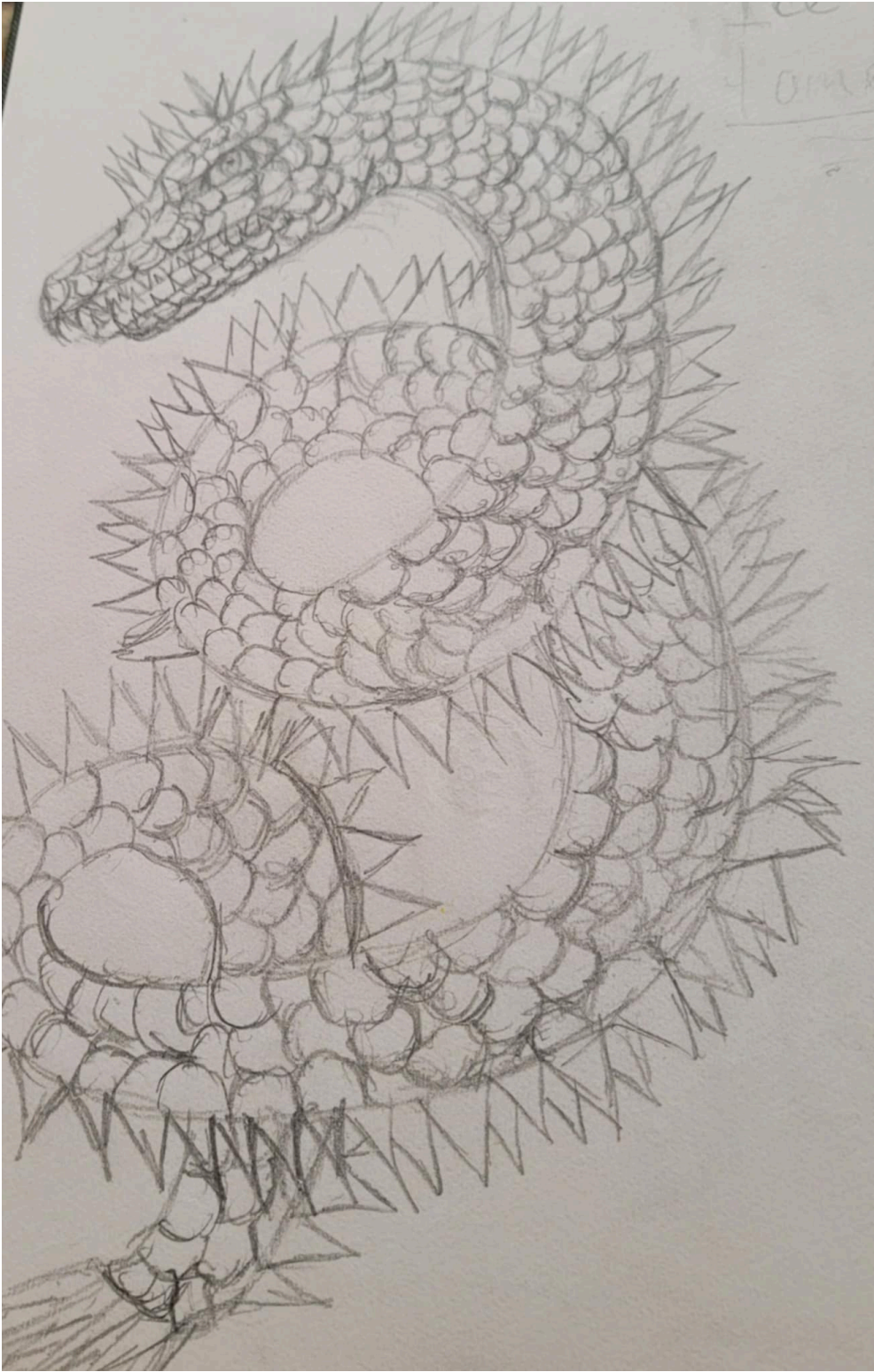
Death is a dragon's skeleton that turns you into ash. Individuals who reside on or are excused from Death Island never come back.





## White Serpent

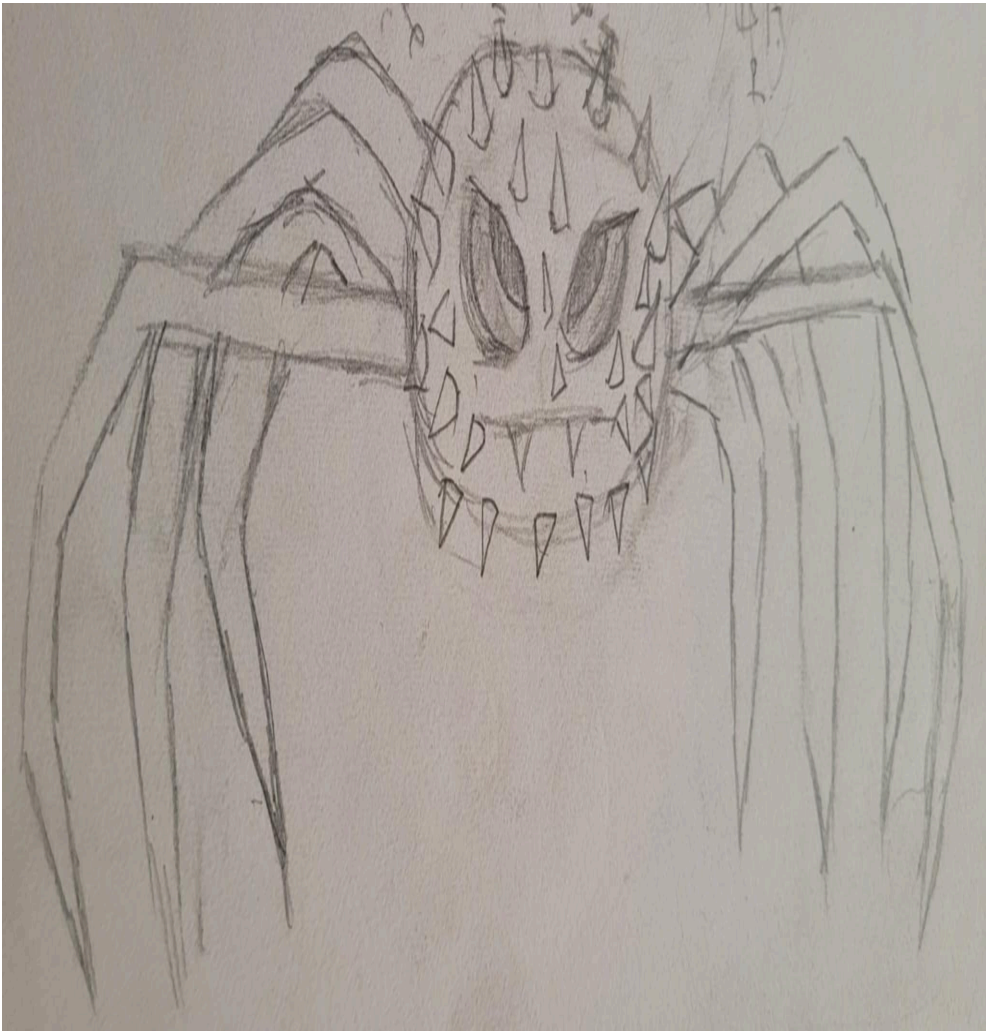
The white serpent is a blue spined, long-scaled reptile. On the outside, he resembles a white-bodied, legless dragon. The weather turns into winter when the white serpent strikes, freezing people in its wake. After slowing down, their heart rate swallows them up. Fire is the white serpent's weakness since ice is its strength.





Spear Crawler

the body of a tarantula covered with sharp spikes . The tarantula is dangerous near water since it is designed to go through it because its element is Earth, unlike other tarantulas that detest waste. Fire is the spider's vulnerability, and it may move from one location to another when it has access to water. The spider pierces humans with a spear that emerges from his body, killing them and causing blood, before making his getaway through wells.







16

# 1

The planet exploded one hundred years ago. There was no warning, no prediction. We were the only ones to survive, safe and secure in an escape pod drifting through space. Do you wonder why this happened? Let's go back one hundred years to the beginning of the end.

Krypton was our home, a planet glowing with colorful fluorescent lights. Emperor Marius ruled the planet alongside his wife, Hazel, and their twin sons: Soulless, the elder, and Haden, the younger. Soulless was a black elf with no eyes, a terrifying figure who consumed souls and overthrew planets. But he wasn't always a monster. He was once a regular black elf—until tragedy shaped his destiny.

The story began with two brothers, both princes. One brought pride to the world, while the other brought misery. Their father, furious with the troubled son, cursed him and exiled him from the planet. The noble brother went after the exiled one and pushed him into a deadly swamp, thinking he was ridding the world of evil. But the swamp did not kill him. Instead, the exiled elf rose from the swamp, his flesh burned away to reveal his skeleton. The curse their father

17



had placed on him ensured he wouldn't die but would instead live eternally, wandering the planet, consuming souls in an endless attempt to satisfy his hunger. To make matters worse, any male heir he fathered would inherit the curse.

Emerging from the swamp, the dark elf vowed revenge. He destroyed planets and devoured souls. Years passed, and he hid in a cave. A young female elf found him, offering food and companionship. Against all odds, they fell in love and had four sons and one daughter. Their descendants grew into a nation, hidden in the caves. War eventually came, and the dark elves claimed victory. Krypton fell. Most elves were either captured or killed, while a few escaped and searched for a new home.

Those who survived stumbled upon a dead planet. They were running out of food when an asteroid struck. It brought water, grass, trees, and plants, reviving the barren land. The survivors believed the gods had answered their prayers. Creatures appeared, helping them cultivate the land and thrive. Over time, humans multiplied. They built houses, dams, spaceships, and trains, transforming the dead planet into a new home they called Solitude. For a while, everything seemed perfect—but perfection never lasts.

Thirteen years after the escape, a young boy named Oliver was working on a wheat farm with his father and other men. The sun blazed down as they slashed the wheat with sickles. Suddenly, a large, fiery rock appeared in the sky, tumbling toward the forest. "Hey, Dad!" Oliver shouted, pointing at the falling object. "Look at that!"

Simon, his father's best friend, grinned. "I wonder what it'll bring—creatures, technology, or vegetation." But Oliver's father remained silent, his face tense. The rock struck the forest, igniting a fire that spread quickly. The men laughed in triumph, eager to investigate. "I'm going to check it out!" Simon exclaimed, rallying the group. All the men followed him—except for Oliver's father, who remained cautious. "We should go home," he said firmly.

"But, Dad!" Oliver pleaded, his blue eyes wide with excitement. "I never get to see the asteroids! Please!" His father's expression hardened. "No. We're going home. Now grab your sickle."

"You never let me do anything!" Oliver yelled, frustrated. "I wish you were more like Simon!" With that, he ran off, ignoring his father's calls. He found a nearby cave and hid until his father's voice faded. This was his chance to see the wonders of the world and escape his father's shadow.

Following the men's tracks, Oliver made his way toward the forest. He stumbled upon the group and startled Simon, who spotted him. "Oliver!" Simon called. "What are you doing here?"

"Please, can I come with you?" Oliver begged. Simon hesitated, then sighed. "Fine. But if anything happens, you must go home. Understood?" Oliver nodded eagerly.



As they ventured deeper, the air grew colder, and they stumbled upon an unusual sight: trees covered in ice crystals, despite the summer heat. The men were both fascinated and uneasy. When they reached the crater, they found not water or vegetation but a frozen ball of ice. “There’s nothing here,” one man muttered. “We should go back.” But Oliver, curious, stepped closer to the ice. He placed a hand on its surface and gasped. “It’s not an asteroid. It’s an egg. I can feel a heartbeat inside.”

Before anyone could respond, the egg cracked. A massive dragon burst forth, its icy mane shimmering as it roared. Chaos erupted. The dragon attacked, its sharp claws tearing through the men. Blood splattered, and the survivors scattered in panic.

Simon grabbed Oliver and ran, finding a cave to hide the boy. “Stay here,” Simon said, his voice firm. “You’re going to be okay.”

“What are you doing?” Oliver asked, his voice shaking.

“I’m going to lead the dragon away,” Simon replied, tears in his eyes. “Only one of us can survive, and it’s going to be you.”

“No! Don’t leave me!” Oliver cried, clutching Simon’s arm.

Simon smiled weakly. “You’re braver than you think. You’ll be fine.” With that, he ran out of the cave, drawing the dragon’s attention.

The beast chased Simon, who dodged its attacks as long as he could. But he was exhausted, his body frostbitten and weak. The dragon struck him down with its icy breath, and Simon collapsed. His last thoughts were of Oliver, safe and alive.

Back in the cave, Oliver sobbed, hearing the distant roars of the dragon and the crashing of trees. Simon’s sacrifice would haunt him forever.



22

## 2

Oliver was silent, holding his breath as the creature sniffed the air around him. It lingered for a moment, then burrowed into the ground, disappearing. Stunned and shaken by what had just happened, Oliver sat frozen in the cave.

Simon was dead. And it was his fault. He should have listened to Simon's warnings to run away. Or he should have stopped himself from following the men to explore the asteroid's crash site. Now, the monster was loose, wreaking havoc and leaving a trail of death and destruction across cities and kingdoms. Tears streamed down Oliver's face as guilt and regret consumed him. Simon had been his father's best friend. His life had mattered. Why hadn't Oliver fought back? Why had he been such a coward?

In the solitude of the cave, Oliver's thoughts turned to his family—his mother, father, and sister.

23



If the beast reached them, they wouldn't stand a chance. It was faster and more powerful than anything they could fight, and its icy breath would freeze them even if they managed to hide. Despair filled Oliver as he realised there was only one option: he would have to defeat the beast himself. The idea terrified him. What chance did a boy like him have? But as he sat there, he remembered the monster's nature. It was a creature of ice. Its weakness must be fire.

Oliver searched Simon's bag and found a few supplies: a map, a rope, and a bit of hard cheese. Examining the map, his eyes landed on a volcano not far from the forest. That would be his battleground. If he could lure the beast to the volcano, he could destroy it. Determined, Oliver lit a fire with some stones, using its flickering light to study the map further. The reflection on the cave walls twisted and danced, making his surroundings feel even more alien and dangerous.

As dawn broke, Oliver worked to free himself from the collapsed cave. He smashed at the stones with his sickle, his hands blistering and bloody. Finally, light poured in as the rocks tumbled away, and Oliver emerged into the fresh air. Exhausted but determined, he spotted the creature's tracks heading deeper into the forest.

Oliver realised he needed bait. He followed the beast's trail and eventually stumbled upon a horrifying sight: a boy frozen in terror, his body perfectly preserved like an ice sculpture. Beside him lay a goat, its flesh mangled and swarmed by flies. Holding back tears, Oliver stripped off his vest, wrapped the goat in it, and began dragging it away,

ignoring the blood dripping onto his arms.

With the goat as bait, Oliver made his way toward the volcano. He tied the goat's body to a low tree branch near the volcano's edge, then used the rope to prepare a swing that would take him across the bubbling lava. The heat radiating from the molten rock made sweat bead on his forehead, but his hands trembled with fear as he worked to secure the rope. His plan was simple but dangerous: lure the monster with the goat, swing across the lava, and trick the beast into falling to its fiery death.

As night fell, Oliver scattered pieces of the goat along the forest trail to draw the creature closer. His heart pounded as he let out a loud goat call, hoping the monster would hear.

"Baaa! Baaaa!"

At first, there was silence. Then, a deafening roar shook the forest. Birds scattered from the treetops as the ground quaked beneath Oliver's feet. The monster was coming.

Oliver sprinted up the hill toward the volcano, his legs trembling as he reached the summit. He hid behind a bush, peering out as the creature approached. It was massive, a serpentine beast with white scales that shimmered like ice and a blue mane flowing like frost. Its cold, lifeless eyes

scanned the area, and it began feasting on the goat hanging from the tree.

Now was Oliver’s chance. His body froze for a moment, fear threatening to paralyse him. But then he remembered Simon’s sacrifice and the innocent lives lost. He couldn’t fail. He wouldn’t.

Summoning his courage, Oliver leapt from his hiding spot. The monster turned, its icy glare freezing Oliver in place. He shook off the cold terror and kicked the creature to get its attention. Furious, the beast roared and lashed out, but Oliver was already running.

The monster chased him, its massive tail swiping at the ground. Oliver reached the rope and grabbed it. With a deep breath, he swung across the lava, the monster leaping after him. For a terrifying moment, it seemed as if the beast might reach him—but its weight pulled it down into the molten river below.

Oliver landed on the other side, his hands scraped and bleeding, but he was alive. The monster screamed as the lava consumed it, and then all was silent.

As Oliver caught his breath, a sudden burst of light erupted from the volcano. A sword shot out of the lava, embedding itself in the ground nearby. Cautiously, Oliver approached and picked it up. The blade was cold to the touch, impossibly light, and bore an inscription: “The White

Serpent.”

Horried, Oliver realised the sword was more than just a weapon—it was a prison. The monster’s essence had been trapped inside. Ice crystals formed in the centre of the blade, and for a moment, Oliver thought he saw the creature’s icy eyes staring back at him.

Though the beast was defeated, Oliver knew this was only the beginning. More monsters might come. And with the sword now in his possession, he wondered what power it held and who wield it.





# 3

# O

liver stared at the sword, its blue light swirling ominously. Inside, the shadow of a monster twisted and writhed, making his chest tighten with fear. Should he take the sword or hide it? What if more monsters came? Near the dead goat, he spotted his slashed weapon. The goat's body was gone, leaving only a single leg dangling from the tree. The thought of touching the sword made his skin crawl, so he decided to tell his father. At 14, this was too much for him to handle alone.

It was nighttime, and Oliver needed a place to light a fire. Gathering wood, he settled down and stared into the flames. He nibbled on a bit of cheese, but his stomach rumbled with hunger. As he watched the fire dance, he imagined the monster swirling within it, the same way it had swirled in the sword. "You will not sleep tonight," he muttered to himself, pinching his arm to stay awake. But exhaustion crept in, and his head drooped. Soon, he was asleep, his body slumped against the rough ground.

In his dream, Oliver floated above the earth in spirit form. He heard the ringing of a kingdom's bell echo far and wide, signalling a warning. The kingdom was three days' journey from his village, a place where his family often delivered plants for the knights. Something terrible was coming—an army or, perhaps, monsters. He saw the kingdom surrounded by a strong fences, citizens hiding within the castle walls. A mother clutched her young child as the heavy metal doors slammed shut. Nearby, knights prepared for battle. The glow of their cannons lit the night as the fire roared into the forest. Vines and roses burned, the fire consuming everything in its path.

Suddenly, the dream shifted. Oliver saw the fire destroy the monster, leaving behind a green tree covered in vines. A sword with a gleaming green crystal dangled from its branches. Relief washed over him as he realised the kingdom had hope. His family and village might be safe after all. But then, the vision changed again.

This time, Oliver saw his village in the early morning light. His sister was gathering eggs from the chicken coop, her freckled face framed by her orange hair in two pigtails. She carried water from the well as birds chirped overhead. But then, a strange dark pool appeared near the well. From it rose a giant spider, its legs towering over the ground. Oliver's sister froze in fear before leaping into the well to escape. The spider began launching sharp spikes, and villagers scattered. One woman was hit, blood pouring from her wound as she collapsed. The monster grinned cruelly, moving toward her as she cowered.

Oliver tried to scream, but his voice failed him. His sister's terrified cry echoed from the well before the dream faded.

Oliver woke abruptly to someone shaking his shoulder. As his vision cleared, he realised it was his father, tears streaming down his face.

"I heard you," his father said.

"I thought you were lost. When I saw the fire, I knew it had to be you." Oliver tried to smile, but the weight of everything he'd seen crushed him. He couldn't bring himself to tell his father about the monster, the sword, or the horrifying dreams.

"We'd better head home," his father said. Oliver nodded, walking in silence. He didn't want to talk about the monster or Simon, who had sacrificed himself to save him. Shame and grief weighed on him.

"Where's Simon?" his father asked gently.

"He's dead," Oliver whispered, tears streaming down his face.

As they walked, the sound of galloping horses surrounded them. A group of knights in gleaming silver armor circled them, their presence commanding and intimidating. "Stay behind me," Oliver's father instructed.



One knight stepped forward and spoke in a commanding yet feminine voice. “Are you the child who killed the monster?”

Oliver froze, unsure how to respond. How did they know him? Could they be trusted? His father answered first. “My child wouldn’t have the guts to kill a monster. I don’t know what he did.”

“Silence,” the woman snapped, turning her gaze to Oliver. “Did you kill the monster?”

“I didn’t,” Oliver stuttering, shaking. “I was just trying to get away from it.”

The woman stepped forward, removing her helmet. Her golden hair glinted in the sunlight, her blue eyes piercing.

“You lie, boy,” she said.

“Don’t you realise your kingdom is in grave danger?”

Oliver’s mind flashed back to the dream of the kingdom. No, it couldn’t be real. Dreams are not real—they were just stress and fear.

“How can I trust you when you won’t reveal who you are?” Oliver demanded, trying to sound braver than he felt.

The woman smiled faintly, then frowned. “Your family is in danger. We don’t have time for your questions. If you keep hesitating, there may be no one left to save.”

Her words struck him like a blow. Is the dreams real? Was his family truly in danger? His father, sensing Oliver’s distress, placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

The thoughts quietened down as he felt his father embrace

“Sir, lead us to your village,” the woman ordered his father. “It will take us a day to get there,” his father replied, bowing slightly.

The woman nodded, then turned to Oliver. “You’ll ride with me,” she said.

As they rode, Oliver couldn’t help but ask, “How do you know about the monster? How do you know what I’ve been through?”

She glanced at him, her expression unreadable.

“It’s the sword,” she explained.

“Once you’ve killed a monster with it, you see through the monster and sword It’s both a gift and a curse.” She pulled the sword from her scabbard, revealing the green crystal glowing faintly.

Oliver recoiled at the sight.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smirk. “The monster can’t escape now.”

Oliver stared at the forest around him as they rode, losing himself in the sound of birds and the warm sunlight filtering through the trees. He wished he could escape into the sky, like the sparrows flitting from branch to branch. For a moment, he imagined himself with wings, soaring far away from all this madness.





36

# 4

Oliver stroked the horse and started riding. All followed. I was behind the queen.

The queen had naturally blonde hair arranged in plaits. She wore a silver jewellery chest accompanied by a white shirt with navy string embroidery and leaves draped over the collar. The shirt also had blue collars and two buttons on the front.

She bore the symbol of a cherry blossom flower with blue jewellery around it. She also had a crown on her head with blue jewellery in the middle.

The two knights behind her wore helmets that covered their faces except for their eyes. One of their horses was black with spots on the head and white feet, while the other was a chestnut brown. The horse we were on was a white one, appropriate for a young princess. Oliver saw one of the horses picking up fresh grass but being constantly pulled back to prevent further delay.

37

"The forest is beautiful, isn't it?" said the princess.

No response.

"I used to get lost in it when I was young," she continued, still receiving no response.

"I guess your father gave you permission to come," said Oliver.

The Princess, ashamed to admit the truth, replied, "He didn't come with me."

Oliver grew curious and asked, "How come?"

"I wouldn't want to speak about it," she said, tears streaming down her face. "The only thing that matters is the safety of the kingdom and peace. That's all I want." She hesitated before adding, "These monsters scare me. I saw one coming from an asteroid at first. I was terrified, but my kingdom was in danger, and I couldn't sit idly by and watch my walls crumble."

Her voice was quiet at first but then grew louder. The princess placed her fist in the air, catching a drop of rain in her hand as she said, "crumble."

"I did what any princess would do. I fought the monster. When I leapt from the castle without a parachute and thrust the flaming sword into its throat, I thought it was the end. The sword was near my hands when I awoke on the ground. Then I saw you in the clouds. It was as if the sword allowed me to see you."

She placed her hands back down and bobbed on her horse as she spoke about the jump.

The story made Oliver tense as he imagined everything she described. He remembered seeing the vegetation monster burned by a sword. There had been a bell rigging, as well as a boy and a woman running away. He was amazed by her courage and bravery, but Oliver was a coward. He had just stood there and done nothing. By the time he had acted, it was too late.

"You're so talented and amazing. I think you are, and I don't think you need my help; you are capable of doing it on your own," said Oliver.

"What happened when you saw the monster?" asked the princess, looking back at Oliver.



"I was terrified, scared, and afraid, but I thought about my family, the world suffering, and everything dying because I didn't do something about it," Oliver said. "My plan was to save the world and hopefully my family by jumping over the volcano. I still can't believe I did that."

"Just because we are different doesn't mean you can't work with me. We are both in different scenarios--I am royal, and you are poor--but we both care for our families and kingdoms. We are willing to sacrifice our lives and not let fear hold us back."

Oliver nodded in agreement. "Okay, you're right, but I am not trained. How can I come with you when I don't know how to fight?"

"We can teach you and give you money to assist your family," said the princess, looking back at Oliver. "By the way, what happened to the sword? You didn't bring it with you. In the wrong hands, the sword could be dangerous. A kingdom could overpower ours and bring war and destruction instead of peace."

Oliver was terrified by her response because he could feel the tension building up. He wanted to tell her, but it felt easier not to say anything.

"I left it near the volcano," Oliver admitted, trembling.

"You left it? How could you?" she interrupted, raising her tone.

Oliver decided it was wise to change the subject to ease the tension between them. He also felt like he wanted to jump off the horse.

"Who are the two knights behind us?" he asked, looking back before receiving a death stare.

Oliver quickly turned back, watching the princess's hair flip from side to side.

"They are brothers, twins actually, very close and untrusting of strangers," said the princess. "They don't talk much," she added.

"I had a brother once," she continued. "But he drifted across the river saving my life." Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Oliver looked in the direction she gestured.

The horses came to a halt.

"We have reached our destination," said Oliver's father.

Oliver's father was named Owen. Oliver hopped off along with the princess and the soldiers. His father tied his horse to the queen's horse. Soldiers gathered in one place. Owen approached Oliver and gave him a weary smile. He worried about his family--his wife, daughter, and son. He cared about them deeply and was willing to protect them. Even though Owen had lived a difficult life of slavery, freedom, and farming, he never let it show in front of his family. The two sat silently as the queen's soldiers gathered wood for the fire.

The ground was rocky, and the sun was beginning to set. Oliver was starving, but his mind was full of worry about what he was about to do. How could he save his sister? Was she still alive? All these questions popped into his head. As soon as the fire began, his father drifted into sleep. Oliver huddled his legs together. Earlier, he had seen two brothers wearing masks, as if they wanted to hide something from the kingdom.

Oliver looked closely to see if anything about them seemed familiar and asked, "Who are they?" One of the brothers noticed him and stared back with deadly eyes. Oliver quickly turned away and lay down on the ground next to his father, feeling the heat pressing against his face until he finally fell asleep.

As if it wanted to be found, the sword radiated light from a mile away. It sparkled with blue dust and flew through the air, looking for someone to claim it. Its previous owner had been terrified of it and left it. The sword crossed a bridge to a frozen land with giant rabbits. There, it encountered a carriage approaching with the emperor's assistant striking the horses. The light on top of the carriage glowed with golden swirls, and the king spoke to the men through a crystal ball.

"Have you found the boy?" said the king.

"Yes, we have, but we haven't heard more information," said a voice.

"He had the sword, but we don't know where it is," said another voice.

"Find it. Do you know how much power that sword holds? I can overthrow the emperor and rule the kingdom," said the king.

"Yes, sir, I will do that," said the voice.

Upon hearing it was wanted, the sword flew into the



carriage window and shattered the glass. Under his chair, the king looked at the sword, now surrounded by broken glass. The driver and horses halted immediately. The sword--a blue gem with a shimmering handle--lay on the floor. The king was initially terrified of it. It seemed as if the sword had its own brain.

The driver halted the carriage and opened the door.

Concerned for his king, the driver asked, "Are you okay, sir? Are you all right?" He noticed the bright light and the sword.

His eyes lit up in amazement. "Is that what I think it is?" said the driver.

The king crawled up, stood, and looked at the sword. He grabbed it and swung it. A beastly snake with a blue main body flew out of the sword. The king dropped it in fear but quickly picked it up again.

The sword spoke to him in a cold voice. "What would you like me to do with your enemies? Freeze them? Drown them? Trap them in time for all eternity?"

The king replied, "All those things sound right."

"I will give you what you want, but if you break me, I am free, and I will kill you and devour your soul," said the beast.

The king didn't want his soul devoured. He just wanted to overrule the kingdoms. If the king broke the sword, or anyone else did, the beast would be free to devour his soul. However, as long as he held the sword, he could control it and wield immense power.

The king held the sword and smiled.

The driver looked at the king and spoke

"What next?"

"We will overthrow the kingdom of the Xeokkuning Dynasty," said the king



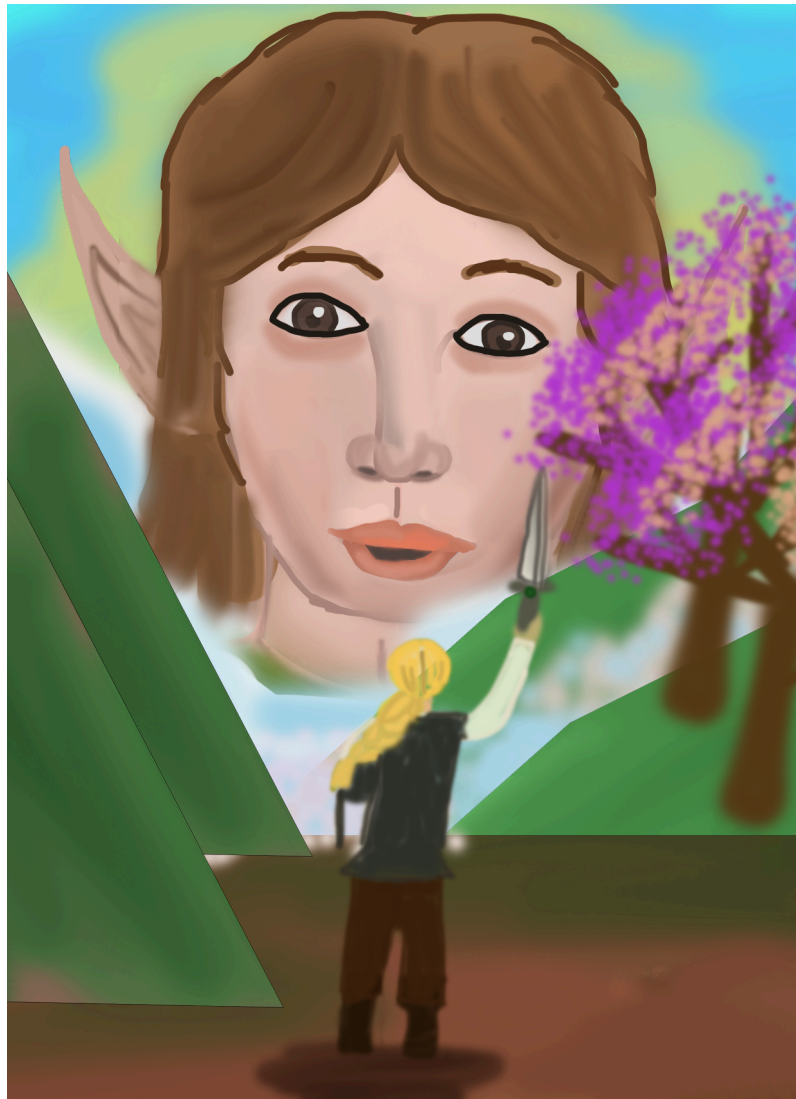
“What about the princess and the boy?" asked the driver

“You know what to do, “said the king

The driver nodded his head and sent off the carriage moving

Oliver and The Princess both snapped open their eyes.





48

# 5

Oliver woke up, flashing back to the dream where he saw the queen's kingdom under threat. Several strands of the queen's hair grew in different directions as she worried about her kingdom being attacked because the boy couldn't keep the sword. However, she was irritated with the boy for leaving the weapon and putting the kingdom at risk. Despite Oliver being just a boy, the queen remained herself, and if she was ever going to be a mother, she had to learn patience.

He scratched his eye. His head felt sore from sleeping on the ground, and his arms ached from sleeping on top of it. Oliver's father stood next to him and offered him a helping hand. He gave his son a warm smile and packed up his belongings, including a pillow and a blanket. Likewise, Oliver was placed with the white horse that was munching on grass and looking into his eyes. Oliver thought it was weird that the horse didn't have pupils. Instead, they were black pools of endless darkness.

His father was right behind him, speaking to Thaddeus. "So

49



how long until we get there? Not long past the meadow where we grow crops, and you'll see the village," Owen pointed to the horizon.

They packed up their things and headed off. Oliver jumped on the horse when the queen was already on it. His father, Owen, led the way as usual. Oliver waved back as Thaddeus smiled and thought about his family he was about to save. He thought about his poor father and all the pain and worry he was experiencing, living knowing he might not see his daughter, mother, or child. Life had been difficult for Oliver since he was a child. There weren't many food options or jobs. Farmer, miller, baker--those were the options. For food, it was mostly porridge and a couple of vegetables like corn, carrots, and peas.

They continued walking through the wheat fields where his father and he worked. Oliver remembered Dad introducing him to the work field. Oliver smiled and ran to his mother at home, hugging her and telling her, "It's really cool. I would love to be like my father when I grow up."

Oliver's family did not have enough money. He worked on the farm with his father and his father's friends to earn money to send him to school. When they didn't have enough, his sister had duties to heal, cook, and gather eggs from the chicken house. When they weren't working, Oliver and Lilly imagined a better world. They found books all around from travelers and kept them, though she didn't know how to read them. One book she got, she showed him, which depicted a knight fighting a dragon. Lilly said one day, "It would be different if I were a traveler, and you

were a knight protecting me from danger."

Lilly had a gap in the middle of her teeth and one tooth on top near her fourth tooth. Mum reckoned it was an adult tooth and should be pulled out. Because they could not afford braces, Lilly would have to push the tooth herself. From afar, Oliver could see the sun rising over the village. Smoke ascended, and worry increased. The town was in ruins, and all the houses had collapsed. Most of the houses were made of wood. Animals were scattered around because the fences where they were held were broken.

In response to his father's urgent request, Owen kicked his horse and galloped to town. The princess followed closely behind the brothers. Oliver observed four houses, each with a dead sheep that appeared to have been impaled with blood. His iris and pupils were missing, and his face was in full terror, completely covered with mud. Oliver had the chills. His heart rate increased, and his worry for his sister grew.

"Where is she?" Oliver remembered his dream of his sister falling into the well close to their house. Their house was in the middle of the village. When he saw the lamb, as well as the dead people with dirt all over them, his father became concerned. He galloped his horse around, screaming each name, "LILLY! MAY!" Owen scanned his surroundings, then moved to another place to repeat calling out their names.

The princess looked around, but there was no monster. Her

mission was not over; she must help Oliver find his family. She looked back and saw Oliver crying uncontrollably, tears streaming from his eyes. When she remembered Oliver's dream of his sister being trapped in a well, she spoke up.

“We must go to your house, Owen,” said the princess.

Owen wasn't paying attention, and Oliver was too upset to speak. They had both lost someone they loved, something they held dear, and a piece of their hearts.

Seeing both, the princess walked up to Owen and stopped near his horse. Just in time, he glanced in front of him and stopped. Owen was furious with the princess for interrupting his search. "What are you doing?" he asked, waving his arm. He turned his horse, facing the rear and walking away from the princess.

Thaddeus was concerned about Owen because he was not paying attention to the princess, and because his loyalty was exceptional, he spoke in defense of the queen.

“You should listen to what the queen has to say.”

Owen mumbled, imagining his wife and daughter dead, holding a dead baby in his hands, and the pool of blood

flowing on the floor.

“Look, you need to go home. Your wife is probably home with your daughter,” said the princess.

As soon as he heard the word “home,” Owen's eyes lit up with shock and recognition. “Of course, why didn't I figure it out before? HOME!”

Owen gathered the courage and energy to investigate his home and find his wife and daughter. He kicked the horse, eager not to delay.

Oliver shook off his conscience and focused on the task at hand. When the princess kicked the horse into a canter, Oliver tightened his grip around her waist. They all slowed down their pace. Owen jumped down and ran into the house. The princess found a well with a collapsed stone frame. Near the rocks was a well with a fallen stone frame covering the hole. Oliver jumped and sobbed.

Looking at the situation Oliver gived up and moaned

“That can't happen!”

“She died.”

“She died.”

As Oliver looked at the princess, he decided not to help Thaddeus, who was a few steps from the front door with a horse. The princess cleared the area with Oliver

Thaddeus spoke to the brothers who were still standing, “Do you mind helping us clear the rocks?”

Angry, the brothers jumped off to help. Oliver stopped crying and offered to help, as it made no sense to cry when he could have saved his sister’s life. His petty crying would have resulted in her death.

Being a weak, skinny elf, he picked up the little rocks and moved them away. The princess was giving instructions to remove the rocks to reveal the well hole. The hole became bigger and bigger, and the brothers kept lifting the rocks, sometimes together and sometimes alone. Thaddeus was tired and hungry from not eating a meal the night before and working until morning. He decided to stop and grabbed some dried meat from his bag.

He complimented Oliver for working and gave him the

meat.

Oliver refused it after feeling grief, anger, and regret for not being there for his sister. He lost his appetite.

Thaddeus offered the meat to the brothers and then the queen refused.

“We’re wasting time feeding people when we should be working on the task and saving the people,” said the queen.

“Relax, princess. A little bit of meat might give us the energy to lift more rocks,” said Thaddeus.

He ate the last piece of meat and decided not to speak anymore and assist. By the time they had moved most of the rocks from the hole, Owen had already found his wife, dying. There was a wooden spear in her breast, leaking blood, and she was breathing very heavily. Owen ran to her, lifting her head and crying on her hair.

“Please, I can’t stay strong without you. Please come back to me, I need you,” he wept each time.

There was a big hole in the roof and damage around the



fireplace and on the floors.

“Owen,” she said, smiling.

Owen stroked her hair again. “I am here,” said Owen, wiping the tears with his left hand.

The wife took a breath, “I need you to take care of our baby. She’s under the floor of the wooden hut,” said the wife.

“What about you? I can’t do this without you,” said Owen.

“Take care of the children: May, Oliver, and the baby.”

Owen placed her down and shook his head in disbelief. He wished for his life to be back, to have his wife safe in his arms, and for his family not to suffer the same fate as he did. But dreams did not come true, just heartache, pain, and misery. Owen was also sick and tired of pretending for his son’s sake; sometimes, he wished he could crawl into a ball like his son and cry.

“You must live on, my love, to keep pushing for our children. They need a father figure in their life, to teach them about love, support, and family. They also need to know that they

are not alone in this world, like you were,” said the wife.

Memories came back to Owen. His fingers fell at the age of 3 years old, two of them. He remembered the boys teasing him, calling him names when he was a child. His mom left him with his aunt when he was 5 years old because he only had three fingers on one hand. They would laugh. All that hurt never left him, until finally, with this family, he felt love, passion, and devotion. When the tear streaked down from his face again, he clutched his wife's hand.

Meanwhile, the hole was cleared, revealing a pond at the bottom with logs floating on the surface. Oliver was nervous and worried that he wouldn’t be able to save his sister. He scanned the area and pointed.

“There!” he shouted, pointing to an unconscious person, half her body submerged in the water, with orange hair draped over her face. She looked completely exhausted, but every survivor instinct told her to clench her bloody and worn-out hands.

Thaddeus looked at the queen for guidance.

“So, what do we do? We might need a rope,” said Thaddeus.

The queen didn't respond immediately. She took a deep breath and remained calm. Her father had taught her that in order to rule a kingdom, one must remain calm, otherwise no one would trust you or believe your plans would work.

"Scan the area and find a rope, and a sturdy object to anchor it to," said the princess.

Thaddeus and the brother sat on rocks nearby, scanning for a solution. Oliver scoured the area, hoping to find a rope in the nearby horse shed. Under the rubble, he found one that he thought might work, but it was dusty, and when he rubbed it off, dust flew into his eyes. He decided to test the rope by wrapping it around his hand and pulling on it.

The princess and Thaddeus were still searching for another rope. They scanned the area to see if the person in the water was sinking.

Oliver grabbed the rope, determined to save his sister from the deadly water. This was the first time Oliver had been brave enough to take action. Most of the time, May acted recklessly. He dodged rocks and gravel, panting and out of breath. He reached the damaged side of the tree. Without hesitation, Oliver tied the rope around the tree and plunged into the hole. He scraped his knees on the floating rocks in the well and dove into the water. He felt an open cut and burn on his right knee, but he ignored the pain, knowing he had to save her.

When Oliver reached May, she was in pain--her eye was swollen shut, and her hair hung around her face. Oliver could feel her pain but focused on making sure she was still alive.

"May, wake up!" he called out.

May didn't respond. She was in so much pain that she groaned, "AHHH, GRR!"

As Oliver's breathing increased, so did his heart rate. He grabbed his hair and pulled, overwhelmed by guilt and frustration. "I can't do this. Maybe I should just die with her," he thought.

Thaddeus, watching from the edge, was about to jump in after Oliver, but the queen placed a hand on his arm.

"The boy must face his fear. He won't grow if you take control. He needs to do this on his own," said the queen.

Thaddeus nodded in agreement.

“I want you to pull the rope with the brothers when I tell you,” the queen added.

She was teaching Thaddeus that in order to grow and become successful, he needed to take risks. She wanted him to challenge himself, to step outside his comfort zone, even if it was uncomfortable.

The queen reminded him that growth and success come from pushing past boundaries and taking action, even when it’s difficult.

Thaddeus gathered the brothers, and they started preparing to pull the rope.

“Oliver,” the queen called out.

Oliver didn’t respond. He was still staring at his sister, lost in thought.

"He’s too consumed by his own thoughts. It’s like he’s already given up," the queen said.

Thaddeus suggested, "Grab a rock and hit him. He just needs your attention."

“I can’t hit a child,” said the queen, trying to reason with him.

“Trust me, a small rock won’t hurt him and will grab his attention,” Thaddeus said with a smile.

The queen crossed her arms and grabbed a small pebble-like rock. She missed her target three times.

“Come on, woman, it’s not that hard! It’s not moving!” Thaddeus teased.

After six attempts, she finally hit him, and Oliver looked up, noticing the shadow of the princess. His breathing slowly returned to normal, and his thoughts cleared.

"I can’t... I don’t know what to do," Oliver said, his breathing increasing again.

"I need you to roll her over and tie the rope around her," the queen instructed.

Oliver looked at the queen and examined the rope in his





62

# 6

As the Queen placed the sword on May's wound, Oliver stepped back, clenching his fists. He knew this was going to hurt his sister, but it was the only way to stop the bleeding and save her life. When the blade touched her skin, May screamed in agony. Oliver shut his eyes tightly, unable to bear the sight.

"Most of the work is done. Just hold on," said the Queen. "Close your eyes, Oliver."

Oliver obeyed, his mind racing. The Queen wanted him calm and focused, free from distraction. May screamed again, her cries piercing the night. The Queen worked quickly, and soon she checked the wound for any bleeding.

"It's holding," the Queen said with relief. A faint smile crossed her face as she turned to Oliver. "You did well. You're very brave."

63

Oliver opened his eyes, still shaken. “Will she be okay?”

“She needs a lot of rest. In the morning, I’ll check her injuries again. But she’ll survive,” the Queen reassured him. “For now, leave her to rest. When morning comes, I want you to eat or take a walk with Thaddeus. Don’t stay here all day.”

They moved back to the campfire, where Thaddeus was cooking a snake over the flames. Owen sat nearby, holding baby Lilly in his arms. The baby stirred, letting out soft cries.

“There, there, baby Lilly,” Owen murmured gently, rocking her to sleep.

Oliver sat next to his father but avoided looking at him. He felt too drained to speak.

Oliver looked at his father "is the baby named after mum"

"yes she is she looks a lot like our mum" said Dad smiling weakly

“Did you find her?” Owen asked softly.

The Queen poked at the fire, but Oliver didn’t respond immediately. Tears filled his eyes. “She’s safe,” he said quietly, his voice trembling.

“Where is she?” Owen pressed.

“In a shed nearby. The brothers are watching her,” Oliver replied, his voice breaking.

“How is Mum?” Oliver asked, his heart heavy.

Owen looked at his son with sorrow. “She’s in heaven.”

Oliver froze. Tears spilled down his cheeks as he shook his head in disbelief. “No! Mum can’t be dead!”

“She is,” Owen said softly, his own grief evident.

Oliver collapsed into his father’s arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Tonight would be another sleepless night. The Queen offered them a piece of snake, but both Oliver and Owen refused to eat.

Suddenly, baby Lilly's cries grew louder. She flailed her tiny fists, punching the air. Her screams were deafening, and Oliver covered his ears, desperate for quiet. He thought about May, lying injured, and wished everything could return to normal.

Owen tried to soothe the baby, wrapping her in a blanket. "There, there. I'm here," he whispered. But Lilly screamed louder, clearly hungry.

The Queen approached, looking at the baby. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"She won't stop crying. I don't know what to do!" Owen admitted, panic in his voice. He turned to her, pleading. "Can you take her?"

The Queen shook her head. "She's your child, not mine. You'll have to figure this out."

Owen's eyes were tired and sunken from days without proper food or rest. Thaddeus, sitting nearby, watched the scene with sympathy.

"The baby is hungry. She needs a mother," Thaddeus said

gently. "My wife could care for her."

Owen hesitated. "What about May? Could she come with me?"

Thaddeus shook his head. "My wife might not be able to take her in, considering how injured she is."

The Queen added, "I can't take May either. My kingdom is under attack. But I'd be willing to take your son. He could have a future in my care--education, meals, and a better life. Here, he'll only be a farmer."

Owen looked at her in disbelief. "My son is all I have left."

"Think about his future," the Queen urged. "He'd have a chance to become something great."

Owen sighed in defeat. "Can I at least say goodbye to him?"

"Of course," said the Queen. "You'll leave tomorrow morning with Thaddeus. That gives you some time."



Owen wept quietly in the corner, holding baby Lilly close. He had already lost so much--his wife, his family's peace--and now his son would leave too. He promised himself he wouldn't abandon his children like his own father had, but here he was, feeling just as powerless.

Later that night, Oliver went to check on May. The shed door creaked open, and the brothers stared at him as he entered. Ignoring their cold gazes, Oliver moved toward the back, where a white curtain hung. Behind it, May lay on a bed of hay, wrapped in sweat-soaked sheets. Her arms were bandaged, her legs bruised, and her breathing labored.

"May," Oliver said softly. "How are you?"

May smiled weakly through the pain. "Could be better," she whispered. "The Queen says I'll recover, but it'll take a year. My ribs are broken, my legs too. I can't even move on my own. It's... hard."

Oliver swallowed the lump in his throat. He wanted to comfort her, but the sight of her injuries was overwhelming.

"How's Dad?" May asked.

68

Oliver hesitated. He couldn't tell her the truth about their mother or their father's struggles. She was already suffering enough. "He's fine," he lied. "He's taking care of Lilly, and Mum's doing great too."

May seemed reassured, but then her voice dropped. "Oliver... the brothers told me something."

"What is it?" Oliver asked.

May's eyes darted around nervously. She leaned closer and whispered, "Once the Queen leaves, they're going to kill me."

Oliver froze, fear gripping his chest. "What?"

"They hate the Queen," May continued. "And they'll take it out on me once she's gone. Please, don't let them hurt me."

69

Oliver felt helpless. He wanted to scream but knew that any noise could draw the brothers’ attention. Tears streamed down his face as he vowed silently to protect her.

When he returned to camp, he found his father whispering urgently to the Queen. Together, they devised a risky plan to smuggle May out of the shed under the cover of darkness.

At midnight, Oliver would help his sister into a wheelbarrow. They would take her far away to safety, even if it meant risking everything.

## 7



72

I wake up on the dusty bed with my hair a mess from being tossed around in the rocks, and my mind is restless. In the days before I was a slave, I was playing with my sister, who had blonde hair and blue eyes. Since I couldn't go on my adventures without her, I was stupid because I was only 9 years old. Despite the danger lurking in the shadows, we were inseparable. I was young, and I never imagined ending up in a place like this. But here I am, a slave in a strange land, never to see my sister again. I wanted to save a frog from water birds. The river was crazy; it soaked my pants. And my sister called for me, telling me lunch was ready. I jumped from rock to rock and slipped near the frog. The frog got startled and jumped into the water. I slipped from the rock and landed in the water. I was forced to cough out water, asking for help. I kept moving with the tide until I found a nearby log.

She grabbed a stick from a nearby branch and told me to hold on while her crown remained on her head. My grip slipped as I tried to cling on. I kept moving with the tide, the

73



birds flying away as my only company. I held onto the log for dear life, my legs shivering as I kept kicking to allow blood circulation. Eventually, I ended up on an island and woke up with my hands tied up, walking with a bunch of children around my age heading toward a cave where I spent 5 years. I am 15 years old now, and my sister was 16 years old when she lost me. She probably came back home crying and screaming, saying I was dead to the king. My mother died a long time ago.

My sister would run the kingdom, and I would be just a memory she wanted to forget. She would be an adult by now, running the kingdom. But I would love to see her and talk to her; she probably won't remember me. Shaking my head.

A knock went over my head. "Right, get up!" said the soldier on top. The soldier stepped over me and gave me a firm look. I stood up quickly along with the others.

I was wearing brown pants, a thin cotton and white baggy tee-shirt. I had a baby face with blue eyes and blonde hair, which covered my eyes. After 5 years of no haircut, my hair had grown to my back, and I tied it back with a strip from my top. All the men got up, and the women were already up. We had been living in this cave for 5 years. There were 3 behind me and 4 in front. The roof was massive rock with spikes on different ends and bumps, and no windows. For years, I imagined what the sky would look like, what time of the day it was, and when I was going to get out of here.

My friend was next to me with a firm face; mostly quiet and only spoke at night. I had collected many rubies in my pockets, about 4. One yellow, orange, red, and purple. I heard rubies have natural power and abilities and came before elves appeared on the planet. We all stood straight as the man inspected us closely. We lined up in straight lines. Then he spoke.

"The usual: one ruby, and you will get a bath," said the man.

All of us wanted a bath, as we had mostly gone 3 months without one.

"Move off."

As soon as we heard those words, we left and walked behind each other. I was behind a girl with messy brown hair. I saw the nearest pickaxe with a wood handle and grabbed it with my left hand, avoiding eye contact and stares. I kept moving with the crowd until I found a nearby space. I kept listening for noise around the area, placing my palm on the stone, still unsure of the place. Then I kept moving deeper into the cave. Tonight, I was going to earn the bath. I placed my palm again, trying to hear a crackle, meaning the crystal was close by. Also, the stone could be warm as well. It felt warm, so I took my chance and swung the pickaxe repeatedly. The rock split into small pieces, and the number of tiny rocks scattered.

I kept picking, doubt creeping into my mind: had I chosen the right place? I chose the warm spot, but I didn't hear a crackle. I kept digging and digging, pushing those doubts aside. There was no one next to me; I was deep in the cave. I kept going, sweat trickling into my eyes, which I wiped away. Finally, I saw a red bit of stone. I was excited, speechless, and off the roof! It had been months since I found a ruby. It shone in my face. I reached my hand to grab it, then an explosion happened nearby. Little rocks fell from the ceiling. Quickly, I lunged for it and placed it in my pocket, leaving my pickaxe behind as I ran toward the noise.

The ground began to shake around me, and lots of rocks flew left and right. I found the spot where the people were, pushing past me, bumping into me. I was cornered near the wall, blocking my face from the pushes and thrusts. I saw a hole in the cave ceiling, which blinded me for a while. I kept looking down, adjusting my pupils. My friend Sebastian came with dark brown curly hair, pushing past the scared people toward me.

"Are you okay?" he said, tapping me on the back.

We both looked at the gigantic egg in the cave. The man who told us to get up ran away screaming, "I didn't sign up for this!" I could describe more details about the man--bald in the middle of the head.

I nodded at him and stood up. He smiled at me and licked

his lips, then glanced at the egg, worried. "What do we do?" he asked, looking for an answer.

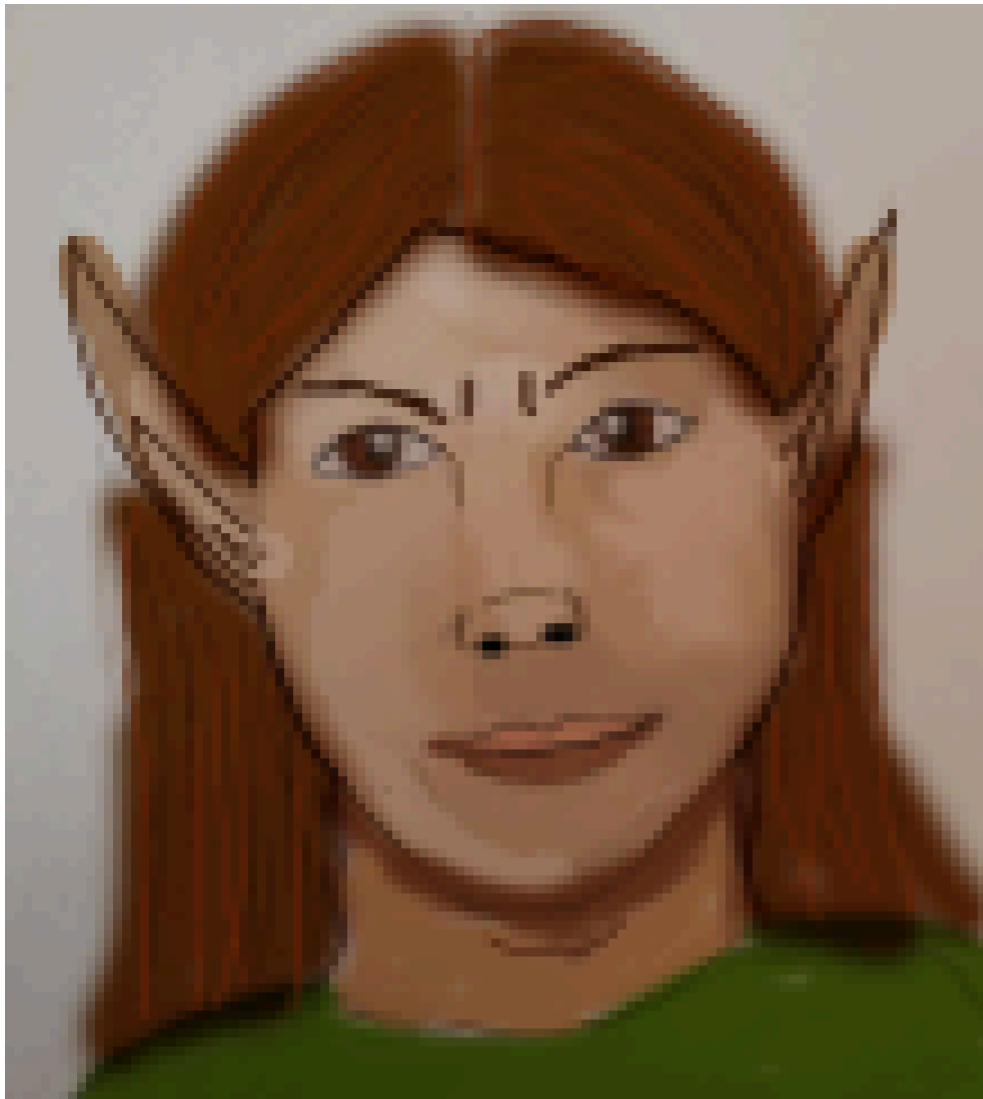
I wasn't paying attention; I was curious to figure out what was inside the egg and why one had dropped here. Had the gods answered my prayers? Could I escape this place?

"We can head from the roof up," said Sebastian, looking at the roof out of the sky.

"We just need height." Then he looked down, defeated.

The eggs started cracking. Pieces of the egg fell, echoing through the cave: bum bum. My friend and I cowered in the corner, covering our ears from the noise. More shells fell, and a red-eyed monster with black pupils appeared, scanning the area. My friend and I remained as still as possible, my heart racing, and my tongue was stuck at the back of my throat. My friend looked left and right, realising the only way to escape was to jump on the monster. I stared at the monster's body--made of lava and rocks. Its mouth was shattered rocks and teeth, and its red eyes locked straight onto me. I stood there, waiting for death to approach. My friend ran, dodging the shots before jumping on its back and getting out.

I was alone, and the next meal. My legs were stiff as cardboard, and I could barely hold myself together. The



78

# 8

Oliver was frightened. This was his first mission attempting to save his sister. His father explained the task to him and told him he would be waiting on the other side. The sun was setting, and Oliver was already having doubts. He was also angry with his father for not allowing him to accompany him. He was his son, wasn't he? Sometimes Oliver wished the monster had never come to the planet. Was God punishing them?

Was it the end of the world? Instead, the Queen was going to task him with rescuing her kingdom. What hope did they have against him? Especially me, I have no training whatsoever, and I am a coward, also very reckless. The sky grew dark again as I sat near my father, looking down. After seeing my sister, all life in me had vanished. My family was crumbling, and I had lost hope.

The food was delivered and set down near me. I didn't respond. The Queen offered me food, but I didn't refuse it—I completely ignored it. The Queen kept protesting, "It is important for you to eat. The task ahead will require all your energy."

79

My stomach rumbled, then stopped as I sipped down some water. My stomach was practically empty, but I didn't care. I was done with life. I didn't want to see pain and sorrow, especially from my family members. My father refused as well and sank his head into his arms.

The baby was still crying and settling each time. Thaddeus was doing the best he could to keep her entertained, but he was drained. The Queen tapped my dad on the shoulder, looked at him with concerned eyes, and pointed toward the dark trees. My father followed her, and I kept looking at the ground.

Owen looked at the Queen, depressed, unhappy, and ready to give up on the world. His hair was a mess, scratchy, and a beard had grown since the last time. The Queen spoke in a firm and confident voice.

"The mission is going to fail. Your son is low on energy, and he's given up on the world, just as you have. I need you to set an example--eat something so your son can have the energy he needs for the mission."

At first, Owen listened, but then he went back to his own feelings, moaning, "Why me? I'm leaving my son. Why do I have to do this? I'm never going to see him again."

Owen lost track of his words and started moaning, looking down at the ground with clenched fists. He felt anger building up because of the Queen. His son was leaving, he had listened to the Queen, and he had lost his whole family. Now, he wanted to take out all his anger on the Queen to make her feel the way he felt.

Owen cried for the first time. He was tired of being strong. He sank to the ground, weeping, creating puddles of tears. He grieved for his wife, who had died and gone, for his child, for not being able to provide as he watched her starve. He was also upset about May not being able to heal her injuries and watching her suffer, and for Oliver, leaving his only son to save his sister.

He took a deep breath and let out all the bad thoughts. He felt as though his soul had been lifted. The Queen knelt beside him, comforting him with a hug. Owen settled down, stood up, and walked toward Oliver. He grabbed his food, which looked like rabbit stew, and placed it on his son's lap. He took another bowl for himself, eating slowly. It tasted so good.

"Here, son, eat," he said, offering the food.

Oliver looked at his food, and his hunger returned. He was a bit tempted but resisted, until he saw his father eating. That made him more tempted than the Queen and Thaddeus, who were eating slowly. Oliver took a bite and loved it. Instead of going slowly, he devoured it quickly, to



the point he almost choked.

His father tapped him on the shoulder. “Wow, son, slow down. Don’t worry, it will last.”

Oliver licked his lips and looked at his father’s bowl, silently begging. His father reluctantly handed it over. Oliver scooped down the second bowl and was ready for thirds. His energy returned, and he felt renewed. His father gave him a smile, and he knew his son was ready.

Around midnight, Oliver was tapped on the shoulder by his father. The Queen was discussing the plan with Thaddeus. They decided it was best to ride out at midnight, each going separate ways: the Queen with Oliver to the Kingdom, Thaddeus with Lilly, and Owen with his daughter, seeking help and assistance.

Oliver stood up and started packing, placing all the items in the horse’s pouch--blankets, water, and everything else. He took deep breaths, focusing on the plan. He whispered to himself, "Focus on getting May out. That's all that matters." He headed toward the shed, not looking back. His father was already on the other side.

Swerving around trees, hills, and slopes, the moon was full, and the stars twinkled in the sky. It was cold, and Oliver shivered since he was only wearing a long top and a vest.

He kept going. He spotted an owl from afar, marveling at the beast, so eager to see it.

He kept walking until he reached the shed. He could already hear the sound of crickets jumping around the grey grass. It seemed peaceful and quiet. The two brothers were sleeping on chairs, slanted and yawning. One on the left side, the other on the right. The brothers had swords at their sides and knight uniforms with the cherry blossom symbol, now more grey than pink. Oliver kept watching for any obstacles. So far, there was nothing.

He crept forward, putting pressure on his toes to avoid making the wooden planks squeak. One of the brothers jolted but then fell back asleep. Oliver’s heart leaped, his mouth dry, but nothing came out. Taking deep breaths, he drew back the curtain and saw May crying. She hadn’t slept because she was so worried about her fate. Oliver was shocked that she hadn’t noticed him, her head bent over the blankets. He tapped her on the shoulder. She jolted, and he shushed her, placing his finger to his lips.

She remained quiet.

“There’s a door at the back,” he whispered. “I’m going to help you. Dad and I will take the wheelbarrow.”

She nodded, listening.

“I need you to be quiet. I know it’s going to be very painful to move,” Oliver said.

May nodded in agreement.

May sat up, gritting her teeth in pain. Oliver helped her up and placed a pillow at her back for support. Already, May was taking deep breaths, pain shooting up her ribs.

Oliver encouraged her. “That’s it. You’re doing great.”

May swung her legs over the side of the bed but shook her head in fear that her feet wouldn’t hold her weight. Oliver placed his hand on her shoulder and said, “I’m here,” smiling. That gave her the encouragement she needed to keep going.

May allowed Oliver to support her under the elbow. She kept biting her lower lip, her legs sore from not being used and aching. She was about to crumble, but Oliver’s weight helped her.

“Keep walking,” Oliver said.

May looked at him and nodded. She kept walking, supported by Oliver. She was heavier than expected, and Oliver was sweating and puffing as he helped her. When they reached the door, he placed May on the hay and opened it. The breeze blew, and May shivered, only wearing a grey robe.

His father brought the wheelbarrow outside and smiled. “You’re ready,” Oliver reassured.

May smiled. Oliver stood her up, and once again, he placed his arm under her shoulders and helped her into the wheelbarrow.

“All good?” his father asked.

His father smiled, but tears of sorrow came. For Owen, this was a hard thing to do. He hugged his child until he couldn’t breathe.

“Take good care of yourself and make me proud,” his father said.

May grabbed Oliver’s hand before he left, desperation in her eyes.

“Is it true you’re leaving without us?” she asked.

Oliver took a deep breath. “Yes, I have to go with the Queen,” he said, looking down.

“Don’t go. Please stay!” She held his arm tightly, not wanting him to leave. “I need you. I can’t be alone. No one to talk to or hang out with. Please, I can’t leave without you.”

May looked down. “What actually happened to Mum? I haven’t seen her, and all I’ve seen is a baby.”

May looked closely into Oliver’s eyes, reading his thoughts. “You lied! How could you? What happened to her?” she said.

“ANSWER ME!” she screamed, squeezing his arm tightly. It reddened, and Oliver pleaded for her to let go.

May let go, apologising for leaving a red mark on his wrist. Oliver ran away, not wanting to break the news to his sister, and hopped on the horse.

“Wait, Brother! Come back. I’m sorry, please!” she moaned,

holding her hand out in desperation. Her blue eyes were filled with tears of sadness and sorrow.

Oliver hopped on the horse, feeling sorrowful and guilty for leaving his sister. He should have told her that their mother was dead, but he was speechless and considered her condition more. The Queen didn’t bother looking at him. She knew he had so many concerns. They rode off into the forest, with Thaddeus following them. Owen headed north, away from the people. Oliver glanced at his father until he could no longer see him, wondering if he would ever see his family again.



88

# 9

The enemy sat triumphantly on the throne. He had seized control of the Xavier Kingdom and obtained one of the legendary swords, yet his hunger for power was unsatisfied. He was determined to collect all the swords and kingdoms, striving to become a god.

Four knights knelt before him, surrounded by the lifeless bodies of terrified soldiers. Their comrades lay frozen on the bloodied floor, eyes and mouths agape in horror. The knights wore uniforms adorned with cherry blossom motifs, now stained with the remnants of battle.

One of the knights dared to glance up at the figure on the throne and shivered, knowing this was the end. To his right, another knight with dark brown, damp hair and piercing baby-blue eyes struggled to keep his composure. His mouth hung slightly open, betraying his fear, but he wiped his tears and tried to mask his emotions for the sake of his fallen comrades.

89



They had fought valiantly to protect the kingdom but became separated in the chaos of battle. As they ascended the castle stairs, they discovered the lifeless bodies of their friends scattered on the cold stone floor. The knight knew he would have shared their fate if he hadn't been the commander.

The enemy himself was not intimidating in appearance, but his presence was chilling. Overweight with blond hair in pigtails, dark blue eyes, and sausage-like fingers, he wielded power ruthlessly. His massive arms and neck exuded brute strength. The commander knew it would take great effort to defeat him, even with a sharp blade, though for now, the man's hands were bound with metal cuffs--a small mercy.

Behind the commander, the guards whispered among themselves. One, with a brown French mustache, a goatee, tanned skin, and black hair, wore a knight's uniform adorned with golden armbands and brown gloves. He smirked and muttered, "Oh, they're in for a special treat."

"QUIET! Can't you see that I'm talking to my advisor and fellow friend?" the enemy snapped, silencing the guard with an icy glare. The guards stopped their chatter instantly, their faces pale with fear.

The enemy resumed his conversation with his advisors, discussing plans to invade another kingdom and enslave its people. One of the guards, unable to restrain his anger,

suddenly shouted, "You are a man without mercy! Why don't you die like the dirty pig you are?"

The enemy turned to him, enraged. "What did you call me?"

The young guard, barely twenty years old, stood his ground. His blond fringe tied back, his defiant eyes met the enemy's. "You heard me," he said. "You are a dirty pig who will die by a farmer's hand."

The enemy froze, then burst into laughter. The guards joined in, their mocking laughter echoing through the chamber. The commander exchanged glances with his comrades, their expressions a mix of shock and dismay. The young man looked to his commander for support but found only hesitant, grim faces.

"You?" the enemy scoffed, circling the guard with an evil grin. "You could barely hold up a twig with your hands tied behind your back."

The young man puffed out his chest, trying to maintain his confidence, but the laughter of the guards, the king, and even his own allies began to wear him down. His resolve faltered as the enemy waved dismissively and refocused on his sinister plans.

"Enough of this foolishness," the enemy declared. "Let's talk about the matter at hand. I will rule the Weagomore Empire soon enough."

The commander and his fellow knights exchanged worried glances, their unease growing. The enemy turned his attention to the commander. "You will deliver a message to the Weagomore Empire. Tell them they have nothing to worry about and need not prepare for battle."

The commander shook his head firmly. "I won't do it. I've already lost too many lives. I will not betray my people."

The enemy smirked, his double chin trembling as he leaned closer. "You are friends with the king, are you not? You know I'll kill the Queen to get what I want."

The commander stiffened. "You want the Green Sword. You'll use it to destroy the kingdom."

The enemy leaned back, his smile turning cruel. "Precisely. But if you comply, I will spare the Queen. Instead, she will be sent to Death Island."

The commander's face paled. "Death Island? That's a death sentence. No one survives there. The monsters--"

"Not if she hides underground for the rest of her life," the enemy interrupted with a smirk.

"I won't do it," the commander said, his voice barely above a whisper as he looked down.

The enemy's patience wore thin. "Fine," he said. "I'll send the farmer boy. He's useless, and you can keep the Queen--so long as she stays in your dungeons. But if she escapes, I will kill you slowly. And you'll watch as all your guards die before you. Do I make myself clear?"

The commander's hands trembled, but he nodded. His fellow knights gave him reluctant nods of agreement. The guards released the commander's bindings, securing his comrades instead. As they dragged the knights toward the underground dungeons, the commander tried to intervene, but one of the guards struck him across the face. He fell to the ground, his vision fading, the screams of his friends echoing in his ears as they were dragged away.



94

# 10

Oliver awakened left him trembling. His racing heart slowly steadied as he accepted the drink the Queen offered . The cool liquid flowed down his throat, soothing the dryness that had plagued him. Despite his lingering fear, he managed to find his voice.

"We can't fight this alone," he admitted, his tone laced with vulnerability.

The Queen, however, seemed calm, almost at ease. Her gaze wandered to the sheep grazing in the field, focusing on the small comforts of the present rather than the weight of Oliver's words. They made camp beneath a weeping tree, finding solace from the harshness of their reality.

"No, we can't," she eventually responded, her voice steady and unwavering. She drew the Green Sword from its sheath. The sunlight glinted off the emerald crystal embedded in the handle, a symbol of hope and power

95

an enduring beacon in their darkest hours.

"We'll have enemies hunting us, expecting to find a boy and a queen," she continued. "But we must go to the Pura Empire. There, where slaves toil in chains, we will reveal ourselves, break their bonds, and fight for our cause."

Oliver nodded, understanding the gravity of their situation. "But first," the Queen said, focusing on the immediate task, "we need clothing, supplies, and a proper meal for the journey. We'll visit the nearby farm."

As they approached the farm, unease hung heavy in the still air. A once-flowing well stood dry, and the farm appeared eerily deserted. The scent of uncooked food mingled with chimney smoke as they neared the farmhouse, but the scene remained unsettling. Oliver readied his loyal horse, Connor, finding comfort in the animal's presence. The Queen silently prayed for their safety as they approached.

Oliver held his nose as an unbearable stench hit him. The Queen tightened her grip on the Green Sword, prepared for any threats. The air grew colder, and a creeping sense of being watched settled over them. The sheep in the field, typically docile, were panicked, pressing against the fence as though fleeing an unseen terror hidden within the tall grass.

Oliver scanned the area, his eyes landing on a large patch of dirt. It seemed unremarkable, but a distant memory surged forward—an image of a dirt spider, a shape-shifting creature with a ravenous hunger, diving into a well. Panic surged through him.

"The spider is here, near the sheep," Oliver urgently warned.

Despite his caution, the Queen knocked on the farmhouse door and entered as it creaked open ominously. The house was shrouded in darkness, yielding no comfort. Ignoring Oliver's plea to remain outside, she stepped into the void. Reluctantly, Oliver followed, knowing he couldn't face the creature alone.

Inside, the Queen requested light, and Oliver handed her a lighter. She quickly lit a candle, casting flickering shadows across the chaotic kitchen. A burnt meal sat abandoned on the stove. The Queen removed it, fearing it might ignite the house further.

As they explored the other rooms, Oliver glanced out the window and froze. Lifeless sheep lay scattered across the field, their sides pierced by cruel sticks, their eyeballs grotesquely protruding from their sockets. His voice trembled as he spoke, "The beast was here."



Suddenly, his gaze locked on a dozen red eyes glaring back at him from the darkness. Terror gripped him, and he dashed into a nearby room, grabbing a broom for protection. Inside, Oliver's breathing was ragged as horrific memories of his family's torment flooded his mind--his mother's murder and his sister's tragic fall into the well.

"Get a hold of yourself, Oliver," he whispered, trying to calm his spiraling fear.

Meanwhile, the Queen continued surveying the house. She believed the inhabitants had fled in a hurry, leaving behind unsettling clues. Approaching Oliver, she helped him to his feet. "We should go," she said firmly. Together, they gathered essential supplies--clothes, shoes, and a bag to carry their items.

Their escape was interrupted as a massive, nightmarish spider descended from the ceiling. Oliver's scream echoed as they sought refuge under the meal table, armed only with a small ornamental sword and a wooden plank. The Queen looked at him, her expression both proud and expectant.

Oliver took a deep breath, recalling his father's comforting words from long ago.

"What's wrong, Oliver?" his father had asked, placing a

hand on his trembling shoulder.

"I can't do it," Oliver had replied tearfully. "I try to face my fears, but I'm not like you. I'm a coward."

"Don't ever say that," his father had said firmly. "You are brave, Oliver. Braver than you know."

The memory emboldened him. Oliver spoke with newfound confidence. "Hand me the sword."

The Queen, proud of the courage she saw emerging in him, handed him the weapon. Oliver ignited it, the blade glowing with searing flames. He recalled the spider's weakness to fire and resolved to test it.

"Be careful," the Queen warned, gripping his leg. "Aim for the mouth or belly--the spider's shell is too hard otherwise."

Oliver nodded, crawling out from under the table on his hands and knees. The spider hesitated, sensing the fire's danger. It shifted erratically, its many eyes gleaming with malice. Suddenly, it launched porcupine-like muddy sticks at him. Oliver dove behind the kitchen bench, a stick grazing his arm and leaving him bleeding. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the stick out, blood dripping onto the floor.

The spider vanished. Fear gripped Oliver as he realized it was heading for the Queen.

The Queen braced herself, gripping a broken drawer as her makeshift weapon. The spider’s shadow loomed closer, its head peeking under the table. She screamed, swinging the drawer at its face to buy time.

Oliver emerged from hiding, his injured arm clutching the flaming sword. With a cry, he struck at the spider’s legs, severing one. The creature screeched in pain, thrashing violently. Oliver’s sword slipped from his grasp, but the flames consumed the spider. It writhed before collapsing in a fiery heap.

The Queen shouted, "The house is wood and oil—it’s going to explode! We need to leave!"

Grabbing their supplies, they ran from the house just as it erupted into flames behind them. The fire provided warmth and light as they cooked a rabbit stew, savoring their meal around the burning ruins.

Though the battle has been agonizing, the flames symbolized their survival--a beacon of resilience against the darkness. The Queen, impressed by Oliver's bravery,



# 11

May was alone and felt abandoned; her brother, Oliver, had left her. Her father used a wheelbarrow to move her, as she couldn't walk. Every night, her father ventured out to find food, leaving May alone. She was in pain and missed running and playing freely.

May felt bored, and her life seemed meaningless. Every night, her father would kindly dress her wounds. He had given up his wealth for a horse-drawn carriage . May couldn't eat without thinking of her missing brother, Oliver.

They were traveling to the Vegomore Empire to find a cure for May. She tried to distract herself by looking at the passing scenery. When they met another family on the road, a child pointed at May, making her feel embarrassed.

May felt self-conscious about her appearance, with dry, dandruff-ridden, and messy hair. Her father promised they'd find a place to shower in the Vegomore Empire. She wished she could be with her brother and have adventures.

Sometimes, she wondered what would happen if she died and whether God would show her mercy. She wished she could walk again and play in the grass, imagining how much fun it would be.

However, she was stuck in her situation. A bird's constant chirping and her father's distant behavior made her feel more isolated. He encouraged her to eat but rarely ate himself. Sometimes, he would shout in his sleep, expressing his fear of losing his son.

At one point, they reached a bridge, and her father took on a job at a market to earn a meal and directions to the Vegomore Empire. As May looked around, a boy with a monkey toy approached her, briefly brightening her day with a simple act of kindness and connection.

"It's free, for the lady," the boy said with a kind smile.

May pushed it back, saying, "No, thank you. I don't need it."

The boy persisted. "Please take it." May saw a glimmer of her spirit lift.

Reluctantly, May took the monkey toy and placed it in her pocket. The boy seemed somewhat disappointed, but May

wanted to decline politely. "Sorry, shouldn't you be doing your job, selling jewelry?" she asked.

The boy's mother said, "Rowen, come on. No one's going to be fed until this whole batch of jewelry is sold." She had a tight bun, brown skin, a blue scarf, and kind brown eyes. Her physique was both muscular and gentle.

The boy glanced at his mother and said, "Coming, Mother."

May smiled, reflecting on her family and what they used to be, longing to return to those happier times. Her father was busy sweeping sand to earn money. His boss paid him 45 dollars, enough for them to enter the kingdom.

May observed the three stalls at the market. The one on the right was selling jewelry, while a man in the middle stall, with a kind smile and a big white beard, was surrounded by toys. Her father was at the restaurant stall, diligently working until nightfall. May kept shifting in her seat, hoping to avoid a sore bottom.

As the day went on, May's father requested water for their trip and wheeled their cart to an empty stretch of sand beyond the market. May said her goodbyes to the boy, but he was too busy picking up items.



"We need to save water for the three-day trip through the Rocky Desert to the kingdom," her father explained.

May was concerned and asked, "What if we run out of water and don't know our way back?"

Her father replied unconfidently, "We follow the sun," as if foreseeing an uncertain and challenging journey ahead.

The heat pressed on, and the wind swept around May's face. Her father pulled the reins down, and the horse stared at him with brown eyes and flicking ears before running off. May took a deep breath, realizing they would be in the desert for three days, and her last chance of escaping had passed. Her father wheeled the barrow, and May sat down with two bottles beside her and a blanket she gave her father. He worked tirelessly, pulling the wheelbarrow, visibly exhausted after two hours of work without sleep.

As the sun set, the cold pressed in with a chilly breeze. Her father, with baggy eyes, gave the blanket to May, explaining that they had a long trip ahead and she needed all the energy to sleep while he kept watch.

May lay down on the hard wooden barrow, looking at the wood and wondering how she would ever sleep. Slowly, she turned and eventually drifted into a dream about sunshine and waking up in her old room. The scent of eggs

on toast filled the air, and she heard her mother calling, "Breakfast is ready." Seeing her mother after a whole month brought relief and hope. May ran down the corridor, hugging her warm arms and wiping away tears. Her mother reassured her, saying, "I will always be with you."

May looked at her with concern and doubt, asking, "Then why are you not here with me now?" hoping the dream was a reality.

Her mother, with brown hair tied back, looked down at May's blue nightgown and smiled. "You probably didn't sleep well," she said. "I need you to go get some more eggs from the chickens, please, and hurry back."

May hurried away and changed into the room next to hers. Beside her bed was Oliver's brown-framed bed with a red quilt and a white pillow. A bookcase stood nearby, with memories of stealing books from travelers and sharing unexpected tales with her brother. Jumping into Oliver's bed, May felt a letter against her back.

"Gone to work with Dad. Don't have too much fun without me.

From Oliver."



# 12

I woke up wanting more in my life to find my other half but ever since I found the sword it been saying to me to do the unthinkable . At first it was in my mind so I didn't think it could control me then control me with my needs which where to find my sister no matter what. I have control it but what if it came back like flaming fire consuming me until I am nothing. It was night-time we were halfway there and getting closer to the kingdom. I smiled in triumph by golden curly locky sweeping with the wind.

My friend face me near the fire stabbing it with a stick “what if we run into trouble” he said with his brown eyes looking down at me I knew what he mean that he was worried for me and my safety the kingdom where taken over one by one by the Evil King and we where enslaved by him. I listen and didn't not replay it was better this way. My thought where still focused on finding my sister no matter what the other half. I would love to be with her and connect to her life and be part of it. The whispers came again as my friend spoke saying the \

“kingdom is overthrown we don't even know your sister alive, we should run away before we end up dead” said his friend

I cried more the tears of anger swelled and misunderstanding my friends didn't know the pain of loosing someone close to you he told me he was the only child when he left . He run away from home and never came back after his father left for war. I was older when him when we where found after that I have become father model to him.

I looked at him with hurtful eyes and tears streamed from them the voice on my mind saying let him know how you feel, destroy him he will prevent you from meeting your sister.

ingored the voice listening the memories we had together but the voice pushed on destroy him , I ingored . squinting my eyes and clencthing my fist

My friend opened his mouth and looked at me concerned “are you ok”  
I didn’t answer the voice pressed on then it asked me a question “do you want your sister”

“I answered yes”

“will you do anything to get to her”

“I said yes” without even thinking about the consequences.  
The voice consumed me my eyes started hurting like sun blinding my eyes but there was no sun. I kept blinking nothing worked the pain was intense. My friend jumped and screamed

“Liam are you ok don’t worry here use my bottle for your eyes” he touched me and felt a burn Sissle his arm “ouch since when are you hot” My thought where focused on my sister my brain was not itself . My thought dark and corrupt I had no control. My eye where like fire . I looked at my friend and saw his frightened face staring at me he was terrified his mouth gawking . My voice change to more deeper evil voice “you are an enemy who trying to take my sister away from me” I said my lips where forming without me saying anything.

My friend retreat walking backward looking at me pleading and frightened “No, please I am your friend I wouldn’t never harm you”

I didn’t listen my thought where trying to find a way out but all I could think about was my sister looking at me and all the times we missed. The monster in the sword drew power from my power desperation and need. I seized my sword and walked toward my friend my eyes where bright red the sword was in flames “don’t worry I make your death quick” smiling.

“The friend spoke think about your sister what would see you think of you now coming to her as murder” said his

friend

The voice kept pressing but gained control over my body and spoke “this is not what sister wants” I kept speaking over and over again until my eyes changed back to normal and the fire extinguish. I threw the sword away “like my friend instructed” knowing that if I kept the sword it would ruin my friendship and I would be trapped within the beast.

Will Oliver ever accomplish his quest with the queen?

What will May become of may in the desert will see survive?

Will Liam ever find his sister?

Will the Queen ever get her kingdom back?

To be continued



112

# 1

In the desert, May heard the echoes of the wolf. Scared, May looked up at the wheelbarrow. She could see the shadow display of the wheelbarrow's bars and hoisted herself up. She took a deep breath and inspected her pockets. She had a pocket knife for protection. Its dark steel blade pressed against her skin. Then she inspected the monkey carving. Breaking the head open, she found a bird whistle. Curious to figure out what it was, she blew into it, and the owls hooted back. She was astonished. Then she found a letter:

"Something special for the woman. Use it wisely it can call birds to your aid."

Rowan.

May blushed at the secret. The wolf howling grew louder, and May took deep breaths. They were getting closer, and she was prepared to fight. But with only a knife, she wouldn't be able to take down a pack of wolves--probably just one if she jumped on it and aimed for the eye.

As a child, May had learned to hunt at a young age to protect the

113



chickens from foxes. She would kill the foxes and stick them on the fence as a warning. But this was a wolf--much bigger, with stronger jaws and far more intellect. May knew her chances of survival were slim, maybe 0.5%. But she had to try. She kept scanning the area, looking for any shadows, using the full moon as her guide.

"WHOOO," came a sound closer than before. May looked in that direction, her heart rate spiking. She felt the metallic taste of fear in her mouth.

The glowing eyes of the wolf lit up the night. May controlled her breathing, hiding the weapon and trying to look vulnerable. She placed her right hand behind her back.

At the right moment, she planned to attack--leaping and aiming for the wolf's eye. It was a foolish plan, but with her limited mobility, she had no choice. She also planned to use the bird whistle to call the owls if something went wrong.

The wolf crept closer, its snarling fangs glinting in the moonlight. It seemed eager to devour its prey. Seeing no weapon on her, it came even closer.

When the wolf was within 7 centimetres, its foul breath--a stench of death and decay--filled the air. May, used to such smells from her days of leaving fox carcasses on the gate, sprang into action. She leaped off the wheelbarrow and aimed for the wolf's eye. Her knife struck true. The wolf tried to retreat but was caught. May gripped the wolf's paw for dear life as it howled for reinforcements.

She stabbed again and again, the knife plunging into the wolf's eye. Blood dripped onto the ground as the wolf finally collapsed. May let go, rolling off to the side, and crawled back to the wheelbarrow. Her left hand held the bird whistle while her right hand gripped the bloodied knife. The wolf lay motionless.

"Whoo."

"Whoo."

"Whoo."

Three wolves howled from afar.

"SHIT," May cursed. There was no way she could fight three wolves at once. She needed help. Quickly, she climbed into the wheelbarrow, readying her knife in her right hand and the bird whistle in her left. As soon as she saw the wolves' glowing eyes in the night sky, she blew the whistle.

The wolves approached one in the middle, one on the right, and one on the left. Their teeth gleamed, and their growls rumbled like an approaching storm. Sweat dripped down May's face. Death was coming closer, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

The owls arrived five of them, one after another. They circled above in graceful arcs. Beautiful white owls with dark black markings, each the size of a two-year-old child. The wolves snarled, snapping at the air, but the owls dodged and swirled around them, distracting the predators.

May blew the whistle again, and the owls shifted their attention to her. So did the wolves. Hunger burned in their glowing eyes.

The first owl struck, swooping down like a silent arrow, its talons slicing into the wolf in the middle. Two owls attacked together, pecking and clawing until blood pooled beneath the wolf's paws. The wounded wolf screamed in agony, then turned and bolted.

Another wolf came within three meters of May. She lunged with her knife, but the wolf dodged and knocked the weapon from her grip. It grabbed her by the shirt and dragged her across the rough ground. Pain seared through her legs as they scraped against the earth.

May blew the whistle desperately. The owls descended, clawing at the wolf's face and eyes. The wolf growled and dropped her, retreating into the darkness with the owls still pecking at its head.

Her legs burned from the ordeal, and blood trickled from her wounds. Crawling back to the wheelbarrow, she grabbed her water bottle and bandaged her legs as best she could, using her mouth to tear strips of cloth. She placed the bird whistle beside her and prayed her injuries wouldn't become infected.

The sun rose, casting its golden light over the desert. Exhausted, May clutched her knife and the bird whistle as she lay in the wheelbarrow. She had survived the night, but she knew the fight wasn't over.

Tomorrow. She had to rescue him, no matter the cost.



118

## 2

The woman walked down the rain-slicked streets, her black hood pulled low to shield her from the storm. The Pura Empire loomed over her like a shadow—grey, cold, and unforgiving. Being its sorceress was a curse disguised as a privilege. The emperor's greed knew no bounds; he demanded the crystals be mined endlessly, filling his treasury with gold while his people starved. He treated her like a pet, a mere tool for his ambitions.

But she had her own ambitions.

She dreamed of freedom—of wielding her own army and tearing down the empire's foundations. Her chance came when she stumbled upon the Fire Sword, a relic of unimaginable power capable of bending minds through fear alone. Now, she stood before the gates of the Xeokkuning Dynasty, the sword hidden beneath her cloak.

The weary commander guarding the gate looked at her with suspicion. "No visitors for the king. Leave now."

Before he could shut the door, she raised a hand. A gust of wind flung it open, knocking the commander to the ground. She smiled faintly, her purple eyes gleaming beneath her hood.

"You'll let me in," she said.

Guards rushed to the commotion, swords drawn. But when she pulled back her hood, revealing her sharp features and infamous violet gaze, fear rippled through them. One by one, they faltered—except for a tall, muscular man with a commanding presence. He was the king's right-hand man, his braided

119

hair glinting in the lantern light.

"I wish to see the king," she said, her voice calm but laced with authority. She revealed the hilt of the Fire Sword, and the guards stepped back in awe.

The advisor nodded warily. "Follow me."

The corridor they walked through was long and grand, illuminated by glowing lanterns that cast warm light on the intricate carvings along the walls. White stone pillars rose to meet a vaulted ceiling adorned with swirling floral patterns, each detail connected like a never-ending vine. The sorceress walked with measured steps, her boots echoing softly against the marble floor. The air grew heavier as they approached the throne room.

At last, they stopped before a set of towering black curtains. Beyond them, the faint scent of cherry blossoms lingered, carried by the night breeze seeping through an open window. The advisor pushed the curtains aside to reveal the king lounging on a wooden throne carved with cherry blossom motifs. Dressed in loose silk clothes, more like pajamas than royal robes, he gazed out the window at the stars with a relaxed expression.

The sorceress stepped forward, her voice cutting through the silence. "How has the weather been treating you, Your Majesty?"

The king's lips curled into a faint smile as he turned to face her. "It's been quite agreeable. No more biting winds or heavy rains like those cursed winters in the Aedrosea Kingdom. I've even enjoyed tending to the gardens. And you? What brings the famed sorceress of the Pura Empire to my court?"

She circled slowly, her cloak trailing behind her. "Business, Your Majesty. Our crystal mines have suffered a setback—a comet struck one of the caves, putting us behind schedule. But that is not why I'm here. I have come to propose an agreement."

Intrigued, the king straightened his posture. "An agreement?"

She stopped and met his gaze, her purple eyes glinting like amethysts. "If you help me overthrow the Pura Empire, I will give you the Fire Sword for your army."

The king's eyes narrowed, his voice now sharp. "You want my army?"

She nodded. "Not your army, Your Majesty. An army. The Pura Empire bends its soldiers and even children to its will through experimentation. They use fear, manipulation, and unspeakable means to create warriors who will follow any command. Imagine what we could achieve together—with my magic and your strength, we could rule not just the empire, but the entire continent."

The room fell silent, the weight of her words settling over them. The king's advisor shifted uneasily but said nothing. The king, however, leaned back in his throne, stroking his chin as he studied her.

"And what guarantee do I have that you won't turn that sword against me once your goals are met?" he asked.

A faint smile played on her lips. "The same guarantee I have that you won't take the sword by force. Trust, Your Majesty. Trust... and mutual ambition."

The king let out a low chuckle, the sound reverberating through the chamber. "You are bold, Sorceress. I admire that. But boldness alone is not enough to earn my allegiance. Tell me, what's to stop me from taking the sword now and leaving you to the mercy of your enemies?"

She stepped closer, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "Because you know what this sword can do. And you know that even in your hands, the kingdom would not be overtaken unless we join forces."

The king's smile faded, replaced by a thoughtful frown. He glanced at the sword, its hilt barely visible beneath her cloak, and then back at her. "Very well. I will consider your proposal. But if you betray me, I will hunt you down."

The sorceress inclined her head, her smile never wavering. "Then we have an understanding, Your Majesty."

As she turned to leave, the king's voice stopped her. "One last thing, Sorceress. What will you do once the Pura Empire falls?"

Her eyes gleamed as she replied, "I will create an army the world will fear—an army of soldiers and children molded by my power. They will be loyal, unyielding, and unforgiving. Together, we will ensure no kingdom dares to oppose us."



The king’s lips curved into a predatory smile. "That sounds... promising."

The sorceress reached for the Fire Sword but hesitated. "Keep it for now, Your Majesty. I need your support to overthrow the Pura Empire first."

"Do you have any suggestions on where to begin?" she asked.

The king turned to his advisor. "What news do we have about the prisoner we captured?"

The advisor’s expression darkened. "We captured him but left his daughter to die in the desert. Considering she was injured, I doubt she survived."

The king’s gaze hardened. "Who was in charge of this?"

The advisor pointed to a man standing near the door. He stepped forward, smiling faintly. "I wanted to test her. To see if she could survive the desert alone for the night."

The sorceress’s curiosity was piqued. "She sounds promising. Where is her father?"

"I would like a word with him," she added.

"I’ll show you the way," the advisor said.

The king dismissed the meeting, and the sorceress followed the blond man down a dark, winding staircase. The air grew colder, the dim light from torches casting eerie shadows. The cries of prisoners echoed through the stone halls. As they reached the last cell, the sorceress’s gaze fell on a broken man sitting in the corner. His gaunt face and hollow eyes spoke of sleepless nights and unrelenting hunger.

She stepped closer, her voice cutting through the silence. "Tell me about your daughter."

The man looked up, his voice hoarse. "She’s crippled. Nothing more."

The sorceress raised her hand, and an invisible force pulled him closer. Her fingers brushed his temple, and she delved into his memories. Images of a young girl flashed before her eyes: her determination as she hunted her first deer, her defiance in the face of hardship, and her fierce loyalty to her

